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ABSTRACT

Africentrism is a culturally grounded philosophical perspective that reflects the intellectual traditions of both African and African American culture. Africentrism is understood as an attempt to reclaim a sense of identity, community, and power in the face of Eurocentric cultural hegemony. Four orientations to Africentrism are observed: the Classical African Civilization Orientation, the Cultural Continuity Orientation, the Nationalist Orientation, and the Sociocultural and Empowerment Orientation. Although each of these orientations to Africentrism specify somewhat different features of history and culture, some common strands and assumptions tie these orientations together: (1) mental enslavement (cultural hegemony) is the most insidious and contemptuous form of domination; (2) African and African American culture is central to an analysis of African American experience and potential for liberation; (3) self-definition and the power to define the elements and terms of one's social reality is fundamental to any interpretation of culture or social relations; (4) a commonality of cultural experience crosses time and location; and (5) race is the primary unit of analysis that subsumes other variables such as gender or class. From an Africentric perspective, the purpose of education for African American adults should be self-definition, responsibility, a sense of biculturality, critical thought, and freedom. (Contains 34 references) (KC)

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Africentrism and adult education: Outlines of an intellectual tradition with implications for adult education

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Abstract:

Africentrism is defined as a culturally grounded philosophical perspective that reflects the intellectual traditions of both African /African American culture and a continent Africentrism, is a part of a long-standing intellectual tradition in African American thought and practice. Africentrism is understood as an attempt to reclaim a sense of identity, community, and power in the face of Eurocentric cultural hegemony. Presented are four orientations to Africentrism: the Kemet Orientation, the Cultural Continuity Orientation; the Socio–Cultural and Empowerment Orientation; and the Nationalist Orientation. From an Africentric perspective, the purpose of education for African Americans should be self-definition, critical thought, and freedom.

Africentrism and African American intellectual tradition

What is the purpose of education for African American adults? How does this purpose relate to the education of other adults in a culturally diverse society? These questions form the basis for my inquiry into the advantages and limitations of Africentricity as a theoretical and cultural perspective for the education of African Americans in the late 20th and early 21st century. This paper to elaborate the main outlines of the various intellectual traditions that contribute to an Africentric perspective and to suggest some implications of Africentricism for the practice of adult education.

Introduction and clarification of terms

At the outset of this paper, I wish to make clear my preference for the term "Africentrism". "Afrocentrism" is a term that dates from the late 1960s and is related to the use of Afro as a prefix to describe a people (Afro American), a hair style (the Afro and Afro puff), and a perspective (Afrocentric). My own view, shared by others in our field (Sheared, 1993; Guy, Colin, Sheared, 1994) is that Africentrism more accurately identifies the stance that we espouse. After all there is no placed called "Afroca" although there is a place called "Europe" from which is derived the word, "Eurocentrism". Africentric, a contraction of the term, African-centered, is part of intellectual tradition that has the dual objectives of 1) seeking to uncover the contradictions and internal workings of cultural hegemony centered in Eurocentric cultural processes as well as the particular cultural developments of people of African descent. Africentric thought exists whether or not one calls oneself Africentric. While I prefer the term Africentric, the essence of Africentrism is not in the term but in the perspective. What is the perspective?

Africentrism defined

Africentrism is defined by a normative stance toward historical conditions and social imperatives related to black people. Clovis Semmes (1994) points this out when he says, "Afrocentrism [or African-centered thought] is the act of examining phenomena in terms of their relationship to the survival and prosperity of African peoples..." (p. 18). This view assumes a community with a sense of its history and its future.

The fundamental problem facing any analysis of African American experience is that of cultural hegemony which is defined as the historical and systematic subjugation of one culture by another (Semmes, 1991).[1] The engine that powers this cultural hegemony has been the expansion of European peoples across the globe beginning in the fifteenth century through the twentieth century and the subsequent economic exploitation and cultural subjugation of indigenous peoples (Frazier, 1957; West, 1993). While economic advantage was the driving force behind the initial expansion, the exploitation was accomplished by means of various institutional apparatuses. Religion, philosophy, politics, economics, and education were employed to strip Africans of their culture, their ethnic identity, and their humanity and to replace these with a culture of poverty and dependency in which they would see themselves as properly owned and / or controlled by Europeans.

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[1]The principal conceptual means of subjugation relative to persons o f African descent is racism. Racism, therefore, is defined as: the systematic and historical subjugation of a people based on a racial distinction. Popular culture terms such as "reverse racism" "black racism" are misleading since there is no systematic and historical subjugation of "white" people by black people. The phenomenon referred to as "black racism" is more appropriately termed bigotry or discrimination which more directly speaks to the actions and attitudes of particular individuals.

Related directly to these historical circumstances, resistance–often physical but also moral, ideological, and philosophical, and theological–to racism developed into clearly identifiable intellectual and theoretical lines of thought. Africentrism emerged as part of a long-standing intellectual tradition[2] that has taken as its fundamental problem the domination of African Americans by Europeans/ European Americans.

Consequently, a basic goal of Africentric research is the specification of culturally–grounded criteria by which to evaluate African American and European American cultural and social phenomena. A fundamental question is: How can a subordinated group that has had its language, customs, traditions, history, religion, philosophy, political and social system destroyed or de-valued ever hope to identify this set of criteria?" This is a central task of Africentricity since, through cultural hegemony, the worldview of a marginalized person or group becomes that of the dominant group (Fanon, 1957; Woodson, 1933) The oppressed begin to recognize the legitimacy or the "right" of the oppressor to be dominant. The black Rush Limbaughs of pop radio like Ken Hamblin and Armstrong Williams exemplify this phenomenon by adopting the political and moral perspective of the conservative white faction of American politics.

Carter Woodson describes this phenomenon quite beautifully when he says that "... the African mind has been brought under control through the same economics, history,

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[2] In "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual" (1993), Cornel West identifies a central problem in any discussion of a black intellectual tradition–the absence of an institutional infrastructure to support its development. My use of the term tradition here refers to a extra-institutional relationship among thinkers whose work falls into a loose collection that shares basic themes. This problem will be discussed later as a central focus of African American adult education.

philosophy, literature, and religion which have established the present moral codes..." for "...when you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper' place and will stay in it" (Woodson, 1977, p. xiii.). This is the result of mis-education based on white cultural hegemony. We see evidence of this in the self-destructive behavior among African Americans who have internalized racism and who gladly participate in their own oppression.

For Africentrists, the answer to the coercive effect of such domination lies in the resilience of the human spirit and the regenerative processes of cultural expression through which African Americans find a connection between themselves and other peoples of the Diaspora[3]. The aim of Africentric discourse is to shift, critique, and challenge Eurocentric knowledge with knowledge centered in African American cultural context.

Africentric orientations

How have Africentrists (re)defined the world in terms that conform to the experience and culture of African Americans? Put somewhat differently, what are the salient features of an Africentric worldview? I suggest that there are four orientations or foci that have developed within African American intellectual tradition to answer this question. In presenting these, it is important to understand that they are characterized more by differences in emphasis rather that distinct theoretical perspectives.

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[3] By Diaspora I refer to the dispersion of African peoples to various parts of the globe, but principally to the Northern and Southern hemispheres of the Americas.

The Classical African Civilization (Kemet) Orientation

The first orientation I refer to as the Classical African Civilization (or Kemet) orientation. It sees the roots of African, and indeed Western, civilization residing in ancient Kemet, or Egypt/Ethiopia as we know it today. Those who operate within this orientation hold that ancient Egyptian civilization is essentially an African civilization that influenced the later development many sub-Saharan African cultures (Diop, 1986; Williams, 1970). Furthermore, this view asserts a historical connection between ancient Greek philosophy, religion, and science, and letters and that of classical Egypt.

This perspective towards Africentrism dates to the early 19th century. In an 1827 article published in *Freedom's Journal*, a black newspaper founded by Boston Crummel, father of Pan-Africanist and black nationalist leader Alexander Crummel, the argument was made that Egypt should be viewed as part of "black Africa" (cited in Rigsby, p. 11). And further that there was a common bond between Egyptians and African peoples. This view was held as a counter-argument to the emerging view that Egypt was really racially and culturally part of a Mediterranean culture in which the Greeks, the Egyptians and Middle-eastern cultures–and not sub-Saharan black cultures–intermingled. Hence, the designation of "white Egypt" inconveniently placed on the African continent (Bernal, 1987).

Foundational works in this line include George James' *Stolen Legacy* (1954), Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1989?), Cheikh Anta Diop's *African Origins of Civilization* (1974), and Chancellor Williams *The Destruction of Black Civilization* (1971). Individually and collectively, this body of work challenges the claim that western civilization began *ex nihil* with the Greeks and that black peoples have produced no

civilization worthy of mention in human history. The thrust of the work based on this orientation exposes the racism embedded in European systems of knowledge and culture production. It illustrates how racism systematically seeks to deny the socio-cultural and historical relationship between Europe and Africa thereby to denude Africa of any relatively important contribution to humanity.

Among the earliest educational models to incorporate this orientation included many of the early Free African Schools founded in the 1820s and 1830s (Rury, 1983). Examples of educational programs that have adopted this Africentric framework include the curriculum transformation project of the Portland, Oregon schools that produced the African American baseline essays and some rites of passage programs that serve African American inner city communities in cities like Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, and New York (Gill, 1991; Hill, 1992).

The cultural continuity orientation

The second orientation to Africentrism I call the cultural continuity orientation. Scholars in this tradition argue that there is a more or less observable cultural connection between traditional African societies and contemporary and historical African American culture. Cultural continuity is based on the fact that specific cultural elements have survived the slave and colonial experience. These cultural elements are evident in language use (Smitherman, 1977), religious practice (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Hughes, 1995), music (Locke, 1936), dance (Asante and Asante, 1985), aesthetics (Gayle, 1971), and family life (Billingsley, 1968; Nobles and Goddard, 1981). The cultural continuity view asserts a commonality that binds persons of African descent together. Community from this perspective is based on the actuality of African culture. The New Negro

movement, the Harlem Renaissance, the Francophone *Négritude* movement led by Léopold Senghor (1962, 1971, 1972) and others in the nations of West Africa are historical examples of social and cultural movements that focus on the connectedness among Africans in the Diaspora.

Examples of community education programs operating within this Africentric framework include: in Detroit, Simba (Kunjufu, 1986) RAAMUS (Responsible African American Men United in Spirit (Ghee, 1988b) and the "rights of passage" programs (Hare and Hare, 1985) are prototypes of the kinds of ideological, inspirational, educational and cultural intervention organized to counteract the miseducation (Woodson) and misdirection of young black males.

The nationalist orientation

Nationalism in its various forms is the third focus of Africentrism. Nationalists subscribe to the idea that the optimal solution for black people to escape white racism is to create a separate society or nation. Most often, this means a separate individual nation state though not always. Bishop Turner, Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Noble Drew Ali, Louis Farrakhan among others reflect this perspective (Colin, 1989a; Essien-Udom, 1962). The nationalist views the co-existence with whites in multi-racial societies as leading inevitably to further subjugation. The formation of a separate, self-sustaining and self-reliant community based on racial identification is the means to political and economic liberation. Therefore, the primary educational and political task in this orientation is community and institution building.

This might mean a black nation in Africa to escape colonization as reflected in the work of Léopold Senghor (1961, 1971, 1972) or Julius Nyerere (1968, 1971), or it might

mean a black nation on the American continent, as in the case of Elijah Muhammad and the black Muslims. In either case, it is a matter of creating the political and economic means to sustain a distinct black society.

The socio cultural and empowerment perspective

The fourth focus in Africentrism is what I term the sociocultural and empowerment perspective. From this perspective, the experience of African Americans in various contexts becomes the driving factor for defining the nature or quality of experience. This is an inductive approach to naming and defining the world based on the metaphysical assumption of multiple realities and centers. The goal is to critique and to categories and definitions of Euro-American social science in understanding African American life and culture. The main purpose is to enable African Americans to redefine for themselves the constituent features of their life necessary for survival and prosperity. The educational philosophy of Alain Locke (1926, 1934, 1938) and the early W. E. B. Du Bois (1902), the sociology of E. Franklin Frazier (1957) and Andrew Billingsley (1968) to name a few fall into this line of thinking. In the field of adult education, it is this orientation that has been most prominent in the research literature of recent African American scholarship. A sampling of work in this area would include the work of Sheared (1994), Johnson-Bailey (1996), Colin (1994), Guy and Milo (1996) among others.

Main outlines of Africentrism: common themes from the four orientations

While each of the above mentioned orientations to Africentrism specify somewhat different features of African and African American history and culture, there are some common strands and assumptions that tie these orientations together. I suggest several that follow:

1. Mental enslavement, i.e., cultural hegemony, is the most insidious and contemptuous and form of domination.

While the period of physical bondage was cruel and oppressive, the operation of the more subtle forms of oppression through the mechanism of social, cultural, and political institutions in society have served to marginalize and victimize Africans and African Americans even in the post-colonial, post-Jim Crow, post-civil rights era.

2. African/ African American culture is central to an analysis of African American experience and potential for liberation.

Africans/ African Americans must rely on their own socio-historical sense of self and community in order to re-construct positive psycho-cultural images of African peoples. This requires knowledge and acceptance of the history and culture of Africans and African Americans.

3. Self-definition, and specifically, the power to define the elements and terms of one's social reality, is fundamental to any interpretation of culture or social relations. In other words, it is important to know whose voice is being presented and for what purpose or end.

African Americans have been studied, researched, and analyzed by Eurocentric scholars and activists. Interpretations of African American life and culture are thereby most often based on Eurocentric conceptions of good/ bad, functional/dysfunctional, progress/development, rationality/irrationality etc. leading to misrepresentations of African American culture (Gwaltney, 1980). Socio-cultural analysis and interpretation of African/ African American experience is

fundamental to any genuinely Africentric view of the world. African/African American adult educators must suspend belief in traditionally given definitions and concepts of learning, progress, education etc. in order to define the basic elements and processes and structures of African American life and culture.

4. There is a commonality of cultural experience that crosses time and location, e.g., the African American experience; the experience of Africans in the Caribbean, in colonial Africa, etc.

While there are important differences in language, geography, religion, cultural contact and economic and social organization related chiefly to the historical development of colonialism, apartheid, slavery, Jim Crow, institutional racism and other forms of racial oppression that impact the lived experiences of Africans in different parts of the world. However, there are certain cultural commonalities and continuities in music, religious observance, and communication style that transcend many of these differences.

5. Race, understood as a socio-cultural and historical phenomenon, is the primary unit of analysis that subsumes other variables such as gender, class etc. It is important to clarify that this doesn't mean that gender or class or nationality are not important. There are multiple forms of oppression that African Americans endure. In the context of hegemony, these forms are reflections of the dominant culture although the immediate source of oppression may be internal to the African American community itself. For example, gender oppression of females by males is clearly the direct consequence of the attitudes and behaviors of black males towards black females. However, these

> attitudes and behaviors must be seen in light of the larger issue of hegemony. Therefore, other variables must be subsumed under the category of race. It is important to observe that "race" is here understood as a cultural phenomenon rather than strictly as a biological or genetic attribute. The implication here is that there are continuing differences between African and African Americans based on cultural and historical relations. These differences are fundamental in the experience of African Americans and European / white Americans.

Given the foregoing, my own definition of Africentrism is:

> Africentricism is a sociocultural and philosophical perspective that reflects the intellectual traditions of both an African / African American people and a continent. Africentrism is grounded in the philosophical system of traditional African societies that are exemplified in the seven basic values embodied in the Ki-Swahili *Nguzo Saba* (Colin and Guy, forthcoming). With respect to adult education, It asserts that policies, practices, experiences, philosophies, ethical issues, theories, and concepts must be considered and evaluated on the basis of the perspective and experience of African Americans.

The purpose of education for African Americans

In the context of cultural hegemony, then, what becomes the central purpose of education for African Americans? The popular myth of education as a means to individual occupational and economic success simply does not measure up against the experiences of African Americans. I suggest that, from an Africentric perspective, the purposes of education for African Americans should accomplish the following:

1. Help learners to develop a positive sense of identity and community, i.e., Colin's (1989b) concept of selfethnic reflectors
2. Foster a sense of responsibility to help other learners in collaborative learning experiences thereby modeling responsibility to community in the required for success and survival in the larger society.
3. Enable learners to maintain a sense of bi-culturality (Darder, 1991) in which learners maintain cultural patterns of believing, acting, and knowing but also are able to function competently in inter-racial situations.
4. Develop a critical stance toward the dominant culture including the coercive effects of American mass culture as well as mainstream cultural values such as integration, assimilation, and mono-culturalism.

Implications for adult education theory and practice

The challenge that Africentricity poses for adult educators is to critique existing principles and practices in light of the perspectives suggested here. A good deal of adult education research suffers from a mono–cultural perspective on learning and teaching (Flannery, 1994). Africentricism, as with other epistemological and ontological perspectives based on multiple centers, provides a critique to Eurocentric cultural hegemony. In order to surface an oppositional epistemological standpoint, it is important to first acknowledge the fundamental point of multiple knowledges and ways of being. Our concepts of how adults learn, principles of teaching adults, the methods, goals, and purposes of adult education are based on primarily Eurocentric values and assumptions of individualism and humanism must be delimited given the sociocultural frame of reference of Africenrism.

Africentric concepts and beliefs about the importance of community in human existence and the relationship of the individual to the community provide an oppositional and corrective viewpoint. One can see this in the Colin's concepts of selfethnic reflectors and libertory empowerment, (Colin 1989) the philosophy of adult education of Alain Locke and the concept of cultural adult education (Guy, 1996); Sheared's concept of polyrythmic reality (1994) as a way to conceptualize cultural diversity in the classroom. These are examples of Africentricism applied to the teaching and learning of adults. An Africentric perspective sharply critiques the presence of racism in formal as well as informal adult education activities. Colin's (1994) analysis exposes the ways that racism impacts the learning experiences of African American learners in various adult education settings is affected by racism in both subtle and not so subtle ways.

Africentrism provides an interpretive framework for assessing the claims about African American the philosophies of adult education, adult learning, adult programs, and adult education research based on Eurocentric perspectives. For example, the much revered and oft-cited example of Booker T. Washington and Tuskeegee as an exemplary form of African American adult education belies the ideological and anti-Black character of the Tuskeegee model (Anderson, 1988).

And finally, Africentrism serves as a corrective for scholarship that depicts African American and African Diasporan education from a deficit perspective. Even liberal views about adult education that see Tuskeegee Model of Industrial Education or African American women's literary societies as mirror images of similar white instances of adult education does an injustice to the nature and character of African American adult education. Gaps, omissions, and conceptually inappropriate applications to African

American adult education can be corrected through Africentric scholarship. For example, I frequently run into the characterization of Alain Locke as an "assimilationist" or an "integrationist". Such analyses belie the critical perspective that Locke employed to attack Eurocentric educational hegemony. The traditional socio-cultural lens through which we examine African American adult education leads to such errors in conclusion and perception.

Conclusion

In closing, I've tried to characterize Africentricism as part of a tradition in African American scholarship and thought. While there are various emphases in the forms of Africentric thought, there are commonalties that have the fundamental aim of creating an honored presence and acknowledgment of African American knowledge and being. In effect, Africentrism serves to place the experience and culture of Diasporan Africans at the center of any analysis of social phenomena. Adult education from the perspective of Africentrism is emerging as a new way of thinking about adult education. Theory, concepts, and accepted principles change in the context of Africentrism. It is important for adult educators to understand and incorporate Africentrism into their practice as a means to improve service to African American adult learners and to combat the effects of racism and cultural hegemony too often associated with mainstream adult education theory and practice.

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